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ABSTRACT

The brain-flow writing technique, which might also be called the "fast flow" technique, offers a particularly useful means of helping adults overcome writer's block. It also offers some bonuses in the form of enhanced creativity, improved thought-flow, and much faster writing output. There are six steps to brain-flow writing. In the first, or fact-gathering stage, the writer can use a "thinking tree" to record topics and related "branches" the writer plans to deal with in a paper. In the second stage, the writer prepares his or her mind for writing using physical and mental relaxation techniques. In the third stage, the writer reviews the facts by rereading the "thinking tree," deciding what the paper is to accomplish, and who the paper's audience will be. In the fourth stage, the writer leaves the task to engage in some other activity, a step that allows the less dominant right hemisphere of the brain to help in the writer's thinking. In the fifth stage, the writer concentrates on writing, with no holds barred, as quickly as he or she can. In the sixth and final stage, the writer reviews what he or she has written to correct grammar, punctuation, and consistency of style. Writers using this technique may be surprised to discover how little polishing such writing requires. (HTH)

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BRAIN-FLOW WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Most people at one time or another have trouble with actually getting down to the task of writing. Additionally, they often have problems with achieving a sense of flow in their writing. In this paper you will find the steps that will help to get writing started and give it a good sense of flow through effective use of the brain.

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever sat down to write something and found that no matter how hard you tried you could not get the words to flow on to the paper? Or have you ever puzzled for a long time over the problem of how to approach a given writing task? If you have been involved with writing of any kind, almost inevitably you will answer "yes" to these questions.

Writer's block has been with us as a problem for a long time, and many solutions have been offered over the years to cope with it effectively. The brain-flow writing technique, which might also be called the "fast-flow" technique, offers a particularly useful means of overcoming writer's block. It also offers some bonuses in the form of enhanced creativity, improved thought-flow, and much faster writing output.

We are well aware that our brains are remarkable structures. More and more information about how remarkable the human brain really is emerges every day. Ironically, many of the discoveries in the past ten years about the properties of the human brain emerged from the field of artificial intelligence. Computer designers have traditionally made much use of the brain as a model for their activities in producing new computers. And one question they have always had lurking in the backs of their minds has been "How far is it possible for an electronic computer to duplicate the powers of the human brain?" An intriguing and somewhat frightening corollary to this question, of course, is "Will an electronic computer some day equal or surpass the capabilities of the human brain?" The answers to both of these questions are still to be found.

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One concept that has emerged in the studies of the human brain is that it is not simply a machine or a biological computer. It has capabilities that are unique and that we can all learn to use better. Interestingly, one key to learning how to use our brains more effectively is to learn to trust our own brains to a greater degree than most of us are used to. As Morton Hunt says, ". . . our minds are more to be trusted than we had thought" (Hunt, 1982, p. 283).

Have you ever thought about how far you have been taught in this life not to trust your own thinking? Most of us from the time we were small children have been filled with all sorts of injunctions about all manner of events in this world. Most of these injunctions were well-intentioned: but among the many that were useful were a few that were quite corrosive. Hints of self-doubt, limits on personal achievement, unchangeable life situations, and so forth were carved into our young and pliable minds. These injunctions came not only from parents and other adults, but percolated through also from our peers. The effects on our thinking were as insidious as they were profound.

Joseph Chilton Pearce used a term that I think fits these built-in injunctions very well. He calls them "roof-brain chatter" (Pearce, 1976, p. 121). This is a delightful term because it captures the effect so well. Think of when you have planned to do something a bit daring or different. Do little voices start up in your mind telling you why it will not work, or why you are foolish even to consider it? Those voices are your roof-brain chatter. Of course roof-brain chatter is not always wrong. If you are considering walking off the edge of a tall cliff or challenging an alligator to a boxing match, your roof-brain chatter may be quite correct in telling you not do to it! But in other, much less drastic situations, your roof-brain chatter could be quite wrong.

Our brains can help us do remarkable and productive things. But we have to cooperate in allowing our brains to work effectively. And one of the most useful means of helping ourselves to cooperate with our own brains is to give open and positive recognition to the importance of our nonconscious thinking. As Desy Safan-Gerard said a few years ago, "The high value we place on conscious effort can block creativity by trying to force work before we are ready for it" (Safan-Gerard, 1978, p. 81).

In his thought-provoking book, The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind, Julian Jaynes points out, ". . . the actual process of thinking, so usually thought to be the very life of consciousness, is not conscious at all . . . . only its preparation, its materials, and its end result are consciously perceived" (Jaynes, 1978, p. 41).

In a sense we are all biological robots a good deal of the time. We drive cars, ride bicycles, go shopping, and write, to a remarkable degree, without using truly conscious thinking. We seem to have programs in our brains to deal with many of life's events. So when one of those events occurs, we simply turn on our program for that event and let it go. Of course this behavior can occasionally have embarrassing results, such

as walking right past a friend on the street without giving any visible sign of recognition.

To distinguish here between nonconscious and subconscious is important. The subconscious is essentially a Freudian concept, and may or may not have good application to the way the brain actually functions. The nonconscious is that sphere of brain activity that occurs automatically without our giving it any deliberately focussed attention. Even when we are wide awake, we operate in a nonconscious mode most of the time. In fact, some authorities estimate that most of us are really only fully conscious for a total of 15 to 20 minutes a day. Consciousness seems to occur in spurts of a few seconds here and there throughout a typical day.

Now what does all of this have to do with writing? Quite a lot. As we think, so we write. So improvements in our thinking will lead to improvements in our writing. The points I have made about the brain's functioning can be applied practically to writing. It all boils down to a question of programming your brain properly and then allowing it to write in a straightforward, natural, and flowing way.

THE BRAIN-FLOW STEPS

Here are the steps that will help you to let your brain work most effectively for you when writing:

1. Gather your facts;
2. Prepare your brain;
3. Review your facts;
4. Wander off;
5. Flow write;
6. Review.

GATHERING YOUR FACTS

During this first stage I suggest that you try using what I call a "thinking tree." All you need to do this is a blank piece of paper. Write your topic at the top of this sheet of paper. Next, do a little bit of brainstorming with yourself. Write on the paper any points that you plan to deal with in your writing. Make sure that you put these points all over the sheet of paper at different angles to each other. And do not be critical of yourself while doing this.

As you continue with the thinking-tree process, you will find that some points automatically start to grow out of other points. Write these sub-points in as "branches" of the main points

they relate to. You may also find that some points come together naturally under a new heading. This, too, is something to "allow" to happen.

The thinking tree allows you to set out your facts or points in a relatively painless way. It is almost a "sure fire" way of getting yourself to write something, and of overcoming "blank-page syndrome."

Once you have set out all the points that seem to apply, you can then put them into some order of priority. Colored felt tip pens may be useful to help with this. If you wish, this somewhat unorthodox story board can be translated into a good writing outline.

For longer or more technical writing the thinking-tree process can be adapted for use as a research plan. Then you simply have to find the facts to support or flesh out the important points you wish to deal with. In the case of longer pieces of writing, by the way, you will find it useful to use larger sheets of paper for your thinking tree. And, of course, you may find that you must go through several sheets of paper to achieve satisfactory research and planning results.

Suppose you wish to produce a report about the feasibility of growing onions on the moon. Figure 1 is what a thinking tree on this topic might look like.

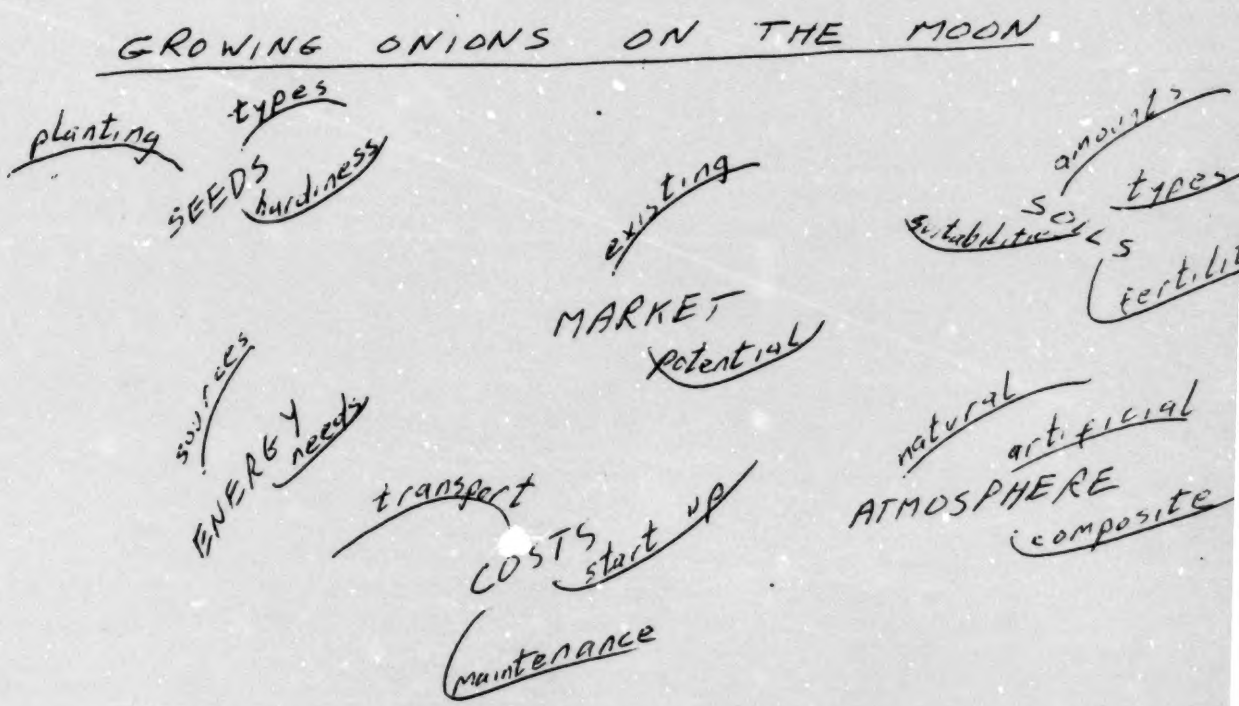

Figure 1. Sample Thinking Tree

Far from being a chore, you can see that this little technique can be fun. And fun is an important aspect of effective brain functioning. Having fun with something helps you to be much more creative with it.

PREPARING YOUR BRAIN

The next stage in the brain-flow procedure is to prepare your brain. What you basically want to do here is to relax and to help your mind dwell on positive images. One good way of doing this is to put yourself through a relaxation process. Here are some steps you may find helpful for doing this:

1. Loosen any restrictive clothing you may be wearing.

2. Relax and make yourself as comfortable as you can. Really let yourself sink into your chair, or lie flat on your back on the floor.

3. Gently close your eyes.

4. Allow all your muscles to relax. Try starting at one part of your body and letting all your muscles relax in an outward flow from that part. Let a wave of relaxation gently move through you.

5. Breathe in slowly through your nose and out slowly through your mouth. Repeat this breathing sequence about ten times, being sure to take good deep breaths.

6. Feel totally relaxed.

7. As the sense of total relaxation comes over you, start to see and experience a beautiful scene, one that gives you a great deal of inner joy. Really examine this scene carefully. Become a part of everything that is going on in it. See the sky, the trees, the water, the people, the flowers, and whatever else there is to see. Hear all the wonderful sounds within your scene. Smell the refreshing fragrances that linger in the air, and be sure to feel the touch of things--perhaps a lovely breeze brushing against your cheek. Really enjoy this scene. It is your own special world.

8. You can feel all the tension that was in you slowly but surely drain away.

9. Allow yourself to relax within your scene for a good, soothing period of time.

10. When you feel ready, gradually let yourself withdraw from this lovely scene. Remember, it is always waiting for you whenever you may wish to return.

11. Let yourself slowly return to the outer world.

12. Slowly stand up, stretch, and gently shake your body awake.

This procedure not only helps to prepare your brain, but also gives you a bonus in helping you to relax as well, and that is all to the good for getting rid of "roof-brain chatter."

REVIEWING YOUR FACTS

Now you can go on to the third stage, which is to review your facts. Simply go back to your thinking tree, and read over all the points you have written there. As you do this, you should decide clearly what you want your writing to achieve. Ideally you should think of this as something tangible that you want your readers actually to do within a specified period of time. It may help you at this stage to conjure up an image of your reader or readers in your mind's eye. Imagine your reader actually doing what you want him or her to do. Of course you should find this process of imaging easier and easier to do as you become more and more comfortable with using a relaxation technique.

WANDERING OFF

The fourth stage is a very easy one. You simply involve yourself in doing something else, anything at all. You can go for a walk somewhere, engage in some other form of physical activity, read an interesting magazine article, attend a meeting, do some other work, and so on.

A lot of the reason for this fourth stage has to do with left-brain/right-brain properties. This particular brain phenomenon has come to be quite well known in the business and academic worlds in recent years. The right cerebral hemisphere in our brains (in a few of us it is the left hemisphere) provides us with strength in the areas of intuition (hunches), insight, images, natural creativity, reveries, and nonrational thinking. It is essentially unprogrammed. The left cerebral hemisphere (in some of us it is the right) tends to use existing brain programs for the different types of activities in which we may engage. For this reason it tends towards more rigidity than the right hemisphere. The left hemisphere excels in linear, logical, judgmental, analytical thinking. It also tends to specialize in arithmetic calculations and the use of verbal language.

The left cerebral hemisphere is referred to as our dominant hemisphere. In other words, it tends to push aside the right hemisphere during most of our waking hours. The right hemisphere gets its chance to take charge when we are asleep. It can then parade many intriguing thoughts before us in the form of dreams. A similar thing can occur when we daydream. In effect, only if the left hemisphere is somehow damped down can we tune into our right hemispheres effectively.

By using the thinking tree, engaging in a relaxation procedure, or simply wandering off, we employ different means of allowing our right hemispheres to help our thinking. Of course we do not want to leave our left hemispheres unused. The idea is to use both hemispheres as productively as we can--in effect to engage in whole brain or holistic thinking.

FLOW WRITING

Once you have wandered off, you are ready for the next stage. This involves flow writing. The idea here, just as the term suggests, is to allow yourself to write with no holds barred. It is vital at this stage to avoid premature criticism of your written work. Avoid thinking about how to put your thoughts well into good grammatical sentences. Instead, just concentrate on allowing yourself to write as fast as you can.

As Adam Smith said, "Concentation is effortless effort, is not trying" (Smith, 1975, p. 48). You have to allow yourself to produce--doubts or self-critical thoughts must be avoided. By pushing for speed in your writing, you avoid giving negative thoughts a chance to gather and wreak their destructive work on your writing. You can always come back to criticize your writing at a later time.

Alan Blackburn points out, "Your brain thinks fast. Use it to help you write fast" (Blackburn, 1981, p. 26). Have you ever considered how fast you can actually write? Fast handwriting might occur at a rate of 35 words per minute. If you can type, particularly on a personal computer, you might clock in at 100 or so words per minute. If you use electronic dictation, you might talk at the rate of 140 or more words per minute. But at what speed do your thoughts occur? We can only guess at this point. Since it may well be possible for a person to read at a rate of 1000 or more words per minute with comprehension, we must state that our thinking has to occur at a speed of at least 1000 words per minute.

If we can think that fast or faster, then it follows that writing at a fast rate should be quite straightforward for us. But we have to trust ourselves to do it, and consequently we must put

aside all self doubts. As Pearce says, "Trust is impossible to the conditioned mind" (Pearce, 1976, p. 58). In order fully to trust your own brain ability, you have to overcome a lot of the conditioning your mind has been subjected to over the years.

If you have never tried producing a fast flow of writing before, you are likely to be surprised at how effectively it works. In order to find this out for yourself, of course, you have actually to try it. But you should go through the stages I have set out here when you do so. That way, you will have tuned up your brain for its best performance.

REVIEWING

Once you have produced your writing with the fast-flow process, you are ready for the sixth or final stage. Review your writing to correct the grammar, check the punctuation, confirm the spelling, and assess the style. You may be quite pleased to find that it needs relatively little polishing up. You should also find that your writing has a good sense of reading flow to it.

CONCLUSION

Our language is a tool of the brain. Grammar, in its turn, is also an aspect of brain function. Our thoughts tend to occur in sequences of words or phrases. The faster we try to put things into words, the faster we tend to fit these sequences together in smooth fashion. When you learn a new language, you tend to work with it slowly and clumsily at first. As you become more and more familiar with it, however, you speed up your sequencing of thoughts in that language. Continued practice makes you smoother in your delivery. And the process is much the same whether you are using the language to speak or to write. Grammar comes into play as a natural outgrowth of our effective use of language.

If you give yourself a reasonable chance to write using the fast-flow or brain-flow technique, you will find that your brain will automatically look after most of your grammatical needs. So your editing or review stage will gradually become faster and faster.

Fast-flow writing is not a new phenomenon. Great writers of the past appear to have used it, although they might not have realized that their being "seized by the muse" related so directly to modern brain research.

Peter Drucker states that in writing a report it makes more sense to do the whole thing in one sitting, rather than to try to complete it in dribs and drabs over a longer period of time (Drucker, 1967, p. 29). The technique of fast-flow writing fits in very well with this concept. It

should also be noted that Drucker believes that managers in this electronic age should be able to use a system of "organized abandonment" (Drucker, 1980, p. 45). This term is remarkably similar to Pearce's term, "controlled abandon" (Pearce, 1976, p. 86). Both terms relate well to the fast-flow or brain-flow process.

Using the technique of brain-flow writing then is not necessarily as strange or out of step with the times as some people might think. In fact, given the importance and continuing acceleration of all forms of communication today, it may well be an indispensible tool for anyone seriously interested in writing.

The brain-flow technique does work. But if you have not used it or something similar before, you may find it a bit awkward at first. But do not, whatever you do, allow yourself to become discouraged. Use this technique and keep using it, and you will find that one day your writing really does flow much better on to the page. At that point you will have succeeded in using the brain-flow technique effectively. From then on you will find the task of writing easier and much more pleasant.

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